

Asbestos product ban planned by EPA

Asbestos, once used widely in construction as a durable insulation material and component in many building products, is facing ultimate market extinction under a sweeping ban being contemplated by the Environmental Protection Agency and alternative product development already under way.

In a letter to asbestos producers, manufacturers and environmental groups, EPA says it plans to issue a proposed rule next July banning six categories of asbestos-containing products and propose another rule in October,

1984, setting production ceilings for remaining products. The limits will decline annually until all products containing asbestos—a known carcinogen—are eventually phased out.

The products covered by the proposed initial ban are saturated asbestos roofing felt, unsaturated roofing felt, asbestos flooring felt, asbestos sheet flooring, vinyl-asbestos floor tile and asbestos-cement pipe. A "major factor" in the speed of the planned phaseout of remaining asbestos-containing products will be the availability of substitute materials, says a spokeswoman for the agency's Office of Toxic Substances. She notes that the proposed rules are a continuation of rulemaking begun in 1979 when the agency announced its intent to ban such products under the Toxic Substances Control Act.

Faced with the EPA threat since 1979 and an Occupational Safety and Health

Administration proposal to sharply reduce worker exposure limits, manufacturers have been scurrying to find substitute materials. Johns-Manville, Inc., Denver, which recently transferred rights to some of its saturated asbestos roofing felts to a group of investors, says the fiberglass now used in its products performs better. The firm and parent Manville Corp. plan to eliminate all of their asbestos products by year-end.

Asbestos-cement pipe producers, meanwhile, have tried a variety of substitutes including carbon fibers, mica, and high-tech thermoplastics, says John F. Welch, vice president of the Asbestos-Cement Pipe Producers Association. So far, he adds, they have not found a material "that holds a candle" to asbestos. Flooring firms similarly see no substitute readily available and indicate they will continue to use asbestos until it is banned. □

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